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LETTER TO PRESIDENT,
ON SUBJECT OF
SLAVE ENLISTMENTS.

STATE OF MARYLAND,

EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT,

Annapolis, September 28th, 1863.

His Excellency, ABRAHAM LINCOLN,

President United States :

DEAR SIR:—In the personal interview I had with your Excellency a few weeks since, upon the subject of the enlistment of slaves in this State, you stated that no orders had been given for such proceedings, and that the existence of such a practice had only been brought to your knowledge two days before.

I, at that time urged some of the most obvious objections to such a policy, to which you replied that the subject was then under consideration, and you were good enough to say, in answer to my request to that effect, that whatever conclusion was reached, as the result of your deliberations, should be communicated to me.

Several weeks having since elapsed without hearing from your Excellency, and the practice of which I complained still prevailing and increasing—a practice all the more reprehensible if pursued without your express authority—I feel constrained once more to bring it to your attention, and again to invoke your interposition in arresting it.

I beg leave to assure you that, burthened as I know you are, with the paramount responsibilities of preserving the Nation, whose existence has been menaced during the whole period of your administration, I am most reluctant to do anything calculated to add to your embarrassments. I trust you need no assurance, that neither the loyal citizens of this State nor myself would seek in ought to arrest or impede any action of the Government calculated to contribute to its safety, or to crush the power of those who are assailing it.

An earnest conviction, however, that the practice to which I am adverting, is, in all its moral effects, exerting an influence in direct opposition to such results, not less than the sense of personal wrong, and of an unjust discrimination against this State, prompts these appeals.

Suffer me to make you acquainted with the course of proceedings usually adopted in these cases, as it has been reported to me. A steamer in Government employ, provided with a recruiting officer and armed guard, is sent into some of the many rivers with which our State abounds, and this officer and guard immediately make known their presence, and find means of communicating with the slaves on the neighboring farms; these slaves usually under cover of the night are induced to quit their owners' homes and to repair on board of the boat. The officer in charge exercises his arbitrary discretion, by no means regulated by the question of the owner's loyalty, in carrying off one man's slaves and allowing another's to return; and when his cargo of recruits is thus made up, he weighs anchor and delivers them at camp in a distant part of the State, sometimes before their owner is aware of their absence.

These owners are not allowed access to them, and in some instances have been positively refused, though their only and avowed purpose was to identify their property as a preliminary to a claim for future indemnity, in case such should be allowed.

Permit me, Mr. President, respectfully to enquire for any Act of the National Legislature that authorizes such a proceeding, and whether it exists or not, to ask why it should be executed exclusively in Maryland.

In the absence of any order from any Department of the Government, which, to my knowledge, assumes to justify such action under any statutory enactment, it is not perhaps proper for me to enter into the discussion of such authority: I cannot, however, forbear the suggestion, that if such power is conferred by any act of the 37th Congress, as some have asserted, then it is being executed here with less regard to the interests of a State that has stood steadfastly by the Government, than has been observed towards others that have been the most conspicuous in the Rebellion.

When your Excellency, by your Proclamation of the 1st of January last, declared the slaves of the States then in Rebellion free, you took the very proper precaution to advise the citizens of those States, by another Proclamation a hundred days before, of the act you contemplated; you not only gave them this timely notice, but you therein announced the purpose of indemnifying even in these rebellious States, all loyal owners who were to be deprived of their slaves; and you manifested a proper regard for the interests of industry by strongly recommending to the slaves so liberated, to continue in all cases when allowed, to labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

You also took the precaution particularly to call attention to, and set forth at length in the first of your said Proclamations, the 9th and 10th sections of the Act of Congress, of 17th July, 1862, which provides for the freedom of certain classes of slaves belonging to citizens engaged in the Rebellion or aiding and assisting it; and if the very succeeding section of the same Act conferred, as some contend, the power to enlist the slaves in loyal States and of loyal citizens, or that power had been created by any other Act—which, for all practical purposes, is equivalent to the emancipation of those enlisted—it is but fair to presume that such a power should not have been set in motion, without at least calling similar attention to its existence and the purpose of enforcing it. But without any such notice, or a notice of any kind, and after the free laborers of the State engaged to such an extent as volunteers in the country's service have left our community almost destitute of agricultural labor, the practice to which I refer is fast stripping it of the little that is left.

Whilst I confidently hope, therefore, that you will not sanction this policy in any aspect in which it can be presented, I feel assured that if adopted at all, it will be only upon the ground that when an imminent public necessity exists, which cannot be otherwise met, property of any description may be seized to provide for it. It is for your Excellency to say whether such an emergency exists at this time, and if it does, whether it exists only in Maryland or is to be relieved only by her resources. We desire, therefore, before our property is impressed in the manner stated, to be advised by your official order or Proclamation, that this urgent public necessity requires its seizure, and in providing for that public necessity, we trust that not only will such proceedings be adopted as may readily enable all who have not forfeited their right to Government protection to be fairly and fully compensated, in accordance with the acknowledged principles of public law, but more especially still, that our State shall not be made the exclusive subject of their operation. Whilst it is true that our own loss might not be actually lightened by applying the same doctrine to every other in our condition, still such an application would relieve the proceeding of one of its most odious features, and rebut the inference to which it might be otherwise obnoxious, that some question of mere local policy had mingled with the motives with which it has been suggested.

There is nothing in the history of this State during the progress of this Rebellion, which warrants the limitation of such a proceeding to her people. Without particularly dwelling upon her course of action, it may be safely affirmed that she has done no act which has ever compromised her loyalty, or impaired her just claims to the confidence of the country. If her property, whether in slaves or anything else, is really needed to put down the Rebellion, there is not a State in the Union that will yield it more cheerfully; but, as your Excellency can well understand, she will not see her property of any kind wrested from her by armed force with no emergent military necessity for it first proclaimed—with no adequate indemnity for it secured—with no similar process elsewhere instituted

and not even an official order promulgated commanding a resort to it here or prescribing the manner of its execution, without at least making known her earnest protest against the proceeding.

It is not improbable that your Excellency may have been informed that these proceedings are not so offensive to the general sentiment of our people as I represent them. To this I can only say, that, in my opinion, no policy adopted by the Government since the commencement of this Rebellion, has ever awakened such unequivocal opposition. With every desire on the part of our loyal population to sustain the Government in its war upon the insurgents, no convention and no primary meeting of any party, or of any fragment of a party, has, to my knowledge, yet ventured to express their approval of it. I am aware that a few have apparently calculated upon conciliating a support for it upon the ground that every slave enlisted will lighten the burthen of the draft and reduce the individual liability to conscription; but those who reason from such purely selfish premises do violence to that cardinal sense of justice prevailing in every well ordered community.

If : tax of any given amount were imposed upon the State. to be raised from the property of its citizens for the use of the Government, we might as well expect to see them justify the forcible and despotic seizure and appropriation of the funds of a selected few to make up the required amount, because it would diminish their own just share thereof, as to expect them to approve an arbitrary movement against the persons or property of their neighbors, because it might result in the exemption of their own.

But whilst I cannot avoid allusion to such assumed influences, suggested as they are at times in the current discussions of the subject, I would by no means be understood as imputing such calculations to your Excellency : I believe that in commanding or repudiating these proceedings, you will be governed only by the consideration of what the exigencies of the country imperatively require ; and that you will not suffer such a policy to be continued, unless these exigencies do so require it :

that you will then exhibit the necessity that demands it, so clearly that it may be placed beyond doubt, and in enforcing the requisition, will apportion it with such even-handed justice that no loyal State or citizen will have reason to complain.

I have the honor to be,

With great respect,

Your obdt. serv't,

A. W. BRADFORD.

